

Dale R. [The Great War in Russian Memory, by Karen Petrone](#). *Europe-Asia Studies* 2014, 65(10), 2023-2024.

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Karen Petrone, *The Great War in Russian Memory*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011, xv + 385 pp., £23.99/\$39.95 h/b.

Historians of European societies have long examined the memory, myth, commemoration and remembrance of World War I after 1918. In contrast, historians of Soviet Russia have argued that the Great War disappeared from official, public and popular memories. The rejection of an ideologically suspect 'imperialist war' in favour of myths built around Revolution and the Russian Civil War made the Soviet Union unique amongst combatants in ignoring, forgetting and marginalising the memory of World War I.

Karen Petrone's excellent new book attempts to 'integrate the Soviet Union into the pan-European history of the memory of World War I' (p.13) by challenging the traditional understanding of the erasure of the Great War from Russian memory. The goal of this groundbreaking study is to explore the existence, and analyse the shifting boundaries, of a discourse of World War I remembrance on the margins of Soviet culture. Petrone argues, 'that the absence of official commemoration did not mean the absence of war memory itself' (p.6). Indeed, given the scale of wartime mobilization, death, disfigurement, displacement and suffering it is surprising that scholars have so often accepted that World War I memory disappeared from official and popular consciousness. In the book's eight chapters Petrone demonstrates how a complex and varied remembrance of war experience occurred regularly in Soviet interwar culture. The memory of the Great War did not disappear as the result of official edict, but developed and evolved 'over decades through thousands of individual bureaucratic, personal, or institutional contests in which memory of the war was both intentionally and unintentionally protected or undermined' (p.8).

This analysis of the public representation of World War I rests on a wide survey of Soviet cultural products, including films, the visual arts, museum exhibits, official military histories, published document collections, journalism and memoirs, produced between 1917 and 1945. However, Petrone's most important source materials, in terms of both their impact on popular perceptions and the attention she devoted to them, are literary fiction and memoirs. At the centre of this book are a close textual analysis and study of the reception of Soviet World War I literature. Some of these works, most notably Sholokhov's *Quiet Flow the Don*, will be familiar to many readers, others less so. Yet, many of these works were popular in the interwar decades, and were published in numerous editions. Petrone's insightful reading of these sources reveals much that is surprising, and even shocking, about what could be expressed publicly about the violence, brutality and horror of World War I.

Four key themes are at the heart of the contested World War I discourses on which Petrone focuses: religion, heroic masculinity, violence and patriotism. These conceptual reference points, all common analytical tools for historians of European World War I memory, allow

Petrone the opportunity to demonstrate the Soviet Union's relationship to wider trends in interwar Europe. Faith, contested masculinities, the brutalising effects of wartime violence, and the nature of competing national and international identities, although they took different forms, were as much part of Russian as European debates about war memory.

Chapter One begins by exploring the Moscow City Fraternal Cemetery, one of the most visible war memorials created during World War I. The cemetery serves as a metaphor for World War I memory in Russia, abandoned and neglected but never completely erased. The book concludes by bringing the story of this cemetery up-to-date, revealing how the battle over war memory plays out today, framing the book's two main parts. The first part, chapters Two to Five, explains the richness of the discourse surrounding the key themes of religion, masculinity, violence and patriotism between 1917 and 1945. Petrone shows how literary depictions and understanding of war were often framed in supernatural terms. A religious discourse about war existed in early Soviet culture despite official state atheism. Although the catastrophe of war prompted rapid political and economic change there were important continuities in tsarist and Russian attitudes about race, ethnicity and gender. However, the memory of World War I challenged the traditional heroic definitions of Russian masculinity. Soviet depictions of war in the decade after World War I frequently depicted death, disfigurement, disease, psychological trauma, atrocity and violence on and off the battlefield. The second part of the book, chapters Six and Seven, explores the shifting circumstances in which, 'Soviet World War I discourse was formed, suppressed, revised, rehabilitated, and sometimes suppressed again' (p.291). Here Petrone stresses two main features of memory. First, that the memory of the Great War in Russia was actively developing in early Soviet society, and received significant official attention. Second, the marginalisation of World War I memory was an active process that involved the active participation of hundreds of thousands of Soviet citizens in shaping and contesting memory. Finally, chapter Eight reiterates Petrone's main arguments, and briefly charts the main contours of the development of memory from 1945 through to the recent past.

*The Great War in Russian Memory* makes a major contribution to the expanding scholarship of the First World War amongst historians of Russia. Petrone's re-examination of World War memory in Russia eloquently demonstrates the existence of competing discourses about World War I in early Soviet Russia, and opens up new lines of enquiry. While this excellent book reveals submerged and forgotten discourses, it prompts further questions about World War I memory. Petrone's research, with its emphasis on literary materials, barely scratches the surface of how individual citizens negotiated their personal memories and experiences of the Great War against a backdrop of shifting official narratives. Although Petrone explores how the memory of war was used to mobilize citizens for a future conflict, it does not explore how war experience and memory informed official policy during the Second World War. *The Great War in Russian Memory* deserves to be read widely, by historians of Russia and the Soviet Union, scholars of World War I in Europe and specialist on historical memory. As the historical profession prepares itself for an upsurge in commemorative activity connected with World War I in 2014, and beyond, this excellent work of scholarship is a timely reminder of Russia's participation in the Great War, connection to European-wide practices

of memory and remembrance, and therefore deserving place in future international commemorations of the Great War.